

TONY COOKE — TRIBUTE

Statement

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the House) [9.45 pm]: I rise tonight to join a couple of members on our side who want to speak about the passing of Tony Cooke. He was a great member of our movement and a friend of yours, Madam President, and a neighbour of yours and your family. I want to acknowledge Ella Cooke, Tony's youngest daughter, who is in the gallery tonight.

I met Tony Cooke back in the mid-1980s when he was working at what was then the TLC Emergency Welfare Foundation. In the late 1980s when Tony was in a relationship with my friend from university and my then colleague at the Australian Nursing Federation, Jane Ardern, we were part of a broader social group. Tony and Jane went on to have Molly and Ella. If you ever want to be reminded of how old you are, you should do what I did last Thursday when I listened and watched as Molly and Ella spoke so eloquently of their love for their father. In 1997, I was working at the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union and I was part of the campaign that Tony led against the Richard Court–Graham Kierath government's third wave of industrial relations changes. Draconian at their heart, those laws pitted individual workers against organised employers. They used the tool of individual agreements at their core and that ultimately led to a race to the bottom in rates of pay and conditions. Last Thursday, I joined you, Madam President, and hundreds of others with Tony's mum, Sally, who has now seen her third child go before her, his wife, Barbara, and Molly and Ella, and his wider family and friends to farewell him.

He passed away late on the night of 24 April after about an 18-month battle with cancer. Yesterday would have been his sixty-third birthday. Tony served as assistant secretary and then secretary of what was then called the Trades and Labor Council—it is now called UnionsWA—from 1993 to 2001. He was the face of one of the biggest union campaigns in Western Australia's history and he was known as a great leader of our movement. Noting his death, our Premier made the point that Tony was the leader that the union movement needed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Premier McGowan went on to state —

In the face of massive change, he brought unions together to work for a fairer future for all Western Australians. He has left a mark on this state, and we are all the better for his efforts ...

In my comments tonight, I want to refer to a couple of things. I want to refer to parts of the eulogy given by another friend and Tony's close friend, former Western Australian senator Chris Evans. I also want to refer to the comments that Molly and Ella posted on their Facebook pages about their dad. I will also briefly use Tony's own words from the book that was put together about the third wave campaign.

This is what Chris Evans said at the funeral last week. I quote —

Struggling with how to approach my reflections on his life, I listened again to the interview Tony did with Geoff Hutchinson on ABC radio a couple of years ago in the 'Who are you?' segment.

Tony's response to the first question—who are you? was, and I quote:

"I'm a 59-year-old unemployed socialist of the liberal tradition, the proud father of two gorgeous daughters and I have had the great benefit of a rich life full of challenges and opportunities, but I fear for my daughters because I benefitted from a far more compassionate society than the one we endure today."

In his own words, Tony defined himself as a man of politics, a man for whom family was his priority, a man who remained positive about life, and a man who always focussed on the importance of the values of the society we share.

He went on to talk about his strong sense of responsibility to give back to the community that formed and supported him, and his need to be useful.

If ever there was a useful life, it was that of Tony Cooke.

He was a working-class Rivervale boy who endured enormously tough times. But with the support of family and community Tony lived a life in which he took every opportunity to improve the lot of his fellow human beings.

He trained in social work in order to give effect to his politics and his sense of responsibility to the wider community.

Tony's work in the union movement reflected that commitment to broad social change and the understanding that bettering the lives of union members went well beyond the issues of pay and conditions at work.

Tony always understood that to be successful, unions had to be relevant in the lives of their members.

He also understood the need to build coalitions among the broader community and harness the power of the media to communicate the union's messages to working men and women.

Tony helped develop and lead a broad agenda for social change and the empowerment of women and indigenous people.

Tony touched the lives of tens of thousands of people through his work and his life.

Yet his humility saw him make time to relate to people of all walks of life and circumstance.

He respected them whatever their shortcomings just as he recognised his own.

As the Premier aptly said, Tony Cooke was the leader the union movement needed as the 21st century began.

Tony led the Union movement during a time of unprecedented attack on the rights and conditions of working people and on the right of trade unions to represent them.

During that period Tony was one of the most recognised public figures in WA.

While he relied on the support of Stephanie Mayman, Keith Peckham and the other union leaders, Tony was the face of the union struggle. Leadership requires vision, courage, integrity, humility, strategic planning, focus and cooperation.

Tony had all these qualities in spades.

And every quality of leadership Tony displayed in this challenging period was rooted in his life experiences and values.

At a time when people bemoan the lack of leadership in public life, they could do worse than emulate what Tony brought to the union movement.

To continue with the eulogy —

35,000 people followed Tony up St Georges Terrace —

I was one of them —

to the steps of Parliament House because they knew he was the real deal.

While the fight was serious and tough, I know for many it was also the experience of their lives.

It was during that campaign that my relationship with my husband started. To continue the eulogy —

They were part of a dynamic and innovative movement in which they knew their cause was just, their contribution was valued, and they could enjoy the experience and the friendships that developed. Under Tony's leadership political struggle was never so much fun.

The industrial campaigns Tony led were eventually successful because he had won the argument.

At every opportunity—in TV studios, town hall meetings and on the streets—Tony would calmly and rationally articulate his case.

His honesty and integrity made his arguments compelling.

At one point, there was a union occupation of this Legislative Council chamber. Tony says in the introduction to the publication *Papers in Labour History No. 20*, of August 1998, titled "The Workers Embassy Scrapbook" —

The Legislative Council occupation was a moment of high drama, but the campaign was marked throughout by its good humour, creativeness and inclusiveness. Enormous support was gained from members of the public other than union members who were called to action as a result of the increasing level of insecurity in their personal lives and their belief that they would not be made "victims". As Secretary of the TLC it was my great pleasure to share their struggle along with the many other dedicated Officers of the TLC, our affiliated unions and their members.

I am going to run out of time, Madam President. I do not know what the rules are about seeking an extension.

The PRESIDENT: The clock might be just a bit slower tonight!

Hon SUE ELLERY: Thank you, Madam President.

I now want to use the words of Ella on her Facebook page, in talking about her dad; so, darling, this is for you —

To many you were the great union leader but to me you will always be Dad. Your intelligence, resilience, strength, compassion, generosity and dedication have, and will, continue to inspire me for the rest of my life. You are the best dad I could have wished for and you never let me go a day without knowing how much you love and are proud of me. You have demonstrated to me what it is to be a wonderful loving

parent, friend and mentor and I hope to pass this on to the little people that the universe decides to bring into my life. I am honoured to be your daughter and I hope to continue to make you proud.

One of the girls—I cannot remember whether it was Ella or Molly—made the point that Tony made the decision to become a father late in life, because he was genuinely worried about what his experiences as a child would mean for him and his capacity to be a parent. Molly and Ella are testament to the fact that he was a sensational parent. I know that he was immensely proud of both his girls, and they recognise what a great parent he was. Molly said —

From the outset life didn't hand you an easy set of cards, but my god, did you play the game with humour and grace.

Thank you for valuing my opinions, even when I was far too young to be offering well-rounded ones. A small girl knowing their thoughts are valued sets them up for life. I promise to do the same for all the little girls (and boys) in my life.

She went on to say much more than I will have time to say tonight.

Many public comments were made on the passing of my good friend Tony Cooke. Tom Percy was one of those who made a comment, and I thought it was quite a good one. He said this in an article in the *Sunday Times* of 29 April —

Tony Cooke lived his life under the weight of crosses that most of us would never be able to bear, or even imagine. His career was notable for many reasons, and for many qualities.

The foremost of these were dignity and tolerance. He was, in many ways, a lesson to us all.

Tony Cooke was my friend, and he left us way too soon.

Statement

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (North Metropolitan — Minister for Regional Development) [9.55 pm]: I want to add briefly to the comments of the Leader of the House in talking about Tony Cooke, because we are truly talking about an extraordinary man. Many eloquent words have been expressed about Tony and his life and the legacy that he has left within his family, and, indeed, within this Parliament and the Western Australian community. Tom Percy put that very well. I always drew incredible inspiration from Tony for the fact that he was able to rise above his family tragedy and become a proud leader. Tony was a person who was prepared not to be defined by his circumstances but to show leadership and an extraordinary commitment to moving the community forward. I was very moved by the eulogy given by Tony's sister, who talked about the role that he had fulfilled within their family and the extraordinary compassion and support that he gave to the rest of the family to help them move through their issues.

Hon Sue Ellery has talked about the extraordinary movement that we had in the 1990s when I was first a member of this place and had for a short time—I think for a year or so—the role of opposition spokesperson on industrial relations. I worked very closely with Tony on that campaign. A great deal has been said about it. However, one of the keys to the success of that campaign was Tony's credibility in the community. The reason Tony had that credibility was that everyone could see, and sense, that he was a deeply good person who was arguing his positions with great rationality and compassion and with a true commitment to the good of society. There was no other agenda on the part of Tony Cooke. He was absolutely dedicated to doing the right thing and to bringing people along with him. There was never any bitterness or rancour. There was never any humiliation in the way in which Tony carried himself and led that debate.

I watched that debate at extremely close quarters during the first, second and third wave. Tony's leadership made a real difference to the success of that campaign. He created a different character, perhaps, from the way in which things had been done in the past. He led the union movement to understand that this was very much a community endeavour and that we needed to move broadly and bring a raft of people with us to ensure that the valuable social safety nets that fundamentally are formed by the rights of working people are maintained. I reference the interview to which Hon Sue Ellery referred, in which Tony thought that he had left for his daughters a society that perhaps was not as good as the one he had enjoyed. I really think he was underestimating the work he had done to ensure that in this state, and indeed more broadly within Australia, we really valued the role the union movement had played, and we really valued the need to have a compassionate society in which we valued equality of opportunity. I think as was said at his funeral, the fact that in the last eight years there had been no attempt to revisit those campaigns is testament to that strength.

Just to Ella and to Molly, I remember you as little kids when we used to go around to your house and have barbecues. You certainly have grown up to be very fine young women and your father would be extremely proud of you, as you are of him.

Statement

HON ALANNA CLOHESY (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [10.00 pm]: I rise to make a brief contribution and acknowledge the life and work of Tony Cooke. I did not know Tony during his 25 to 30 years of being in the trade union movement. I came to Western Australia after that period, and knew him more from a personal point of view. He was very welcoming to Phil and me when we first arrived in Western Australia, and continued his interest in and support of both of us over that time. I particularly acknowledge the work Tony did in the non-government human services sector, or the civil society, which I think he made a significant contribution to. Although he was a lion of the trade union movement, I also think there was a dimension to Tony that saw him live and work his social justice principles. He worked for the Employment Law Centre more recently in around 2016–17. In the early 1980s he founded the TLC Emergency Welfare Foundation and was involved with that for 30 years. That later became the Welfare Rights and Advocacy Service, which is for people with problems with Centrelink, family payments, residential tenancies or other social security issues. It really demonstrated his values that time and again he came back to be alternately chair or a committee member of that organisation that he had founded and moulded. It was an organisation for disadvantaged people, and that spoke to who that man was.

At various times he was a chair and committee member of the Labour Movement Education Association, which gave young people opportunities to learn through internship in the labour movement and civil society organisations. To hear some of the words that young people spoke recently about the experiences and skills that he shared with them was truly amazing, and our Labor movement will be all the stronger for the support that Tony gave that organisation and those young people individually.

More recently he took on the honorary position of executive officer of angelhands, which provides support for people recovering from extreme trauma. Although he was with that organisation for a brief period, the people involved and the people on the periphery of that organisation, like me, got from him a great sense of what could be achieved and a sense of community.

He will be deeply, deeply missed because he dedicated his life to helping disadvantaged people in our community from wherever they came. For me he was personable, approachable and a lot of fun. My deepest sympathies, Ella and Molly.

Statement

HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan) [10.04 pm]: I rise to recognise the extraordinary life of Tony Cooke. There is no question that Tony Cooke was a Labor man through and through, yet this Green is standing to say what an inspiration he was to me. Tony Cooke was instrumental in drawing me into the union movement, and I can honestly say that it was his leadership in the union movement that led me to want to join it in the first place.

I first met Tony in the mid-1990s. As has already been mentioned by Hon Sue Ellery, one of the amazing strengths that Tony Cooke brought as state secretary of the then Trades and Labour Council was his commitment to branch out into a number of social movements. At that point in my life—I was in my 20s—I was very deeply involved with a number of international solidarity movements, as well as a number of social justice campaigns in and around Perth. It was through that work that I first became exposed to Tony Cooke and his inspirational leadership. I was also part of the 35 000 people who marched strong up St Georges Terrace in protest at the outrageous third wave of industrial relations laws. It was the first time that I was truly exposed to how important and powerful the union movement could be in ensuring that the human rights of average working people were able to be upheld, and how important it was that we work together to ensure that we are always working towards maintaining our rights.

I got to know Tony a little better later on when I was down at the Patrick Corporation dispute with the Maritime Union of Australia. It was the second time in my life that I attempted and failed to get arrested, but despite that particular failure, I learnt much about the importance of people coming together to uphold their rights. I think it is significant that we only recently commemorated it being 20 years since that dispute. Where did all that time go?

I went on to work in the union movement, and was involved with UnionsWA while Tony Cooke was state secretary. It was an extraordinary time and I learnt so much. But I also want to comment on just what an incredibly personable and lovely person Tony was, and how supportive he was particularly of younger women who wanted to get involved with the union movement and how encouraging he was. He was certainly very encouraging of me.

I just want to say how sad I am for Molly and Ella, and I also acknowledge their mother, Jane, who I also know. I also acknowledge Tony's wife, Barbara, and Sally, Tony's mother. No mother should ever have to bury her child. It has been mentioned that Tony is the third child that Sally has lost, and that is a tragedy.

But what an extraordinary life and extraordinary man. I will be forever grateful for the inspiration and guidance that Tony Cooke showed me. I think it is an extraordinary legacy of a life well lived. I note again, because I was also one of the people at Tony Cooke's funeral and listened with much delight to the eulogies delivered, the request,

if you like, that came from Tony Cooke towards the end of his life—the plea to all of us to live good lives. I think those are words to live by. Thank you, Tony.

Statement by President

THE PRESIDENT (Hon Kate Doust): Members, I will add some words. First of all, I thank the chamber for enabling this opportunity tonight for people to put on the record their comments about Tony Cooke and his very extraordinary life. Normally, we move a condolence motion only for former members. Tony, unfortunately, never was a member of this place. He always had the potential to be, but, unfortunately, he was never able to get here. Given the contribution that he has made to this state with his work through the trade union movement and to the broader community, I felt that tonight it would be appropriate for people to put some words on the record in support of his very interesting and amazing life.

Tony worked at the coalface of the trade unions in Western Australia for about 25 years. He started out in the Trades and Labour Council, as it was then known, and worked in the state's very first workers' compensation department. He worked in the TLC Building Society. When I came to know him, I was in my mid-20s and I was working at the TLC as a training officer. By then Tony was the assistant secretary of the TLC. As time went on and I went back to my union, I was the vice-president of the TLC and he was then the secretary. I remember the discussions about changing the name from the Trades and Labor Council to UnionsWA, and it was not a very simple conversation at all. It seemed to go on for months on end, but in the end Tony won and we now have UnionsWA.

As other members have said, he will be remembered for his very innovative leadership of the trade union movement during that very tumultuous time that the trade union movement and workers of this state had to deal with, with the three waves of industrial change that were on the table. We have seen photos of Tony leading those significant marches up the Terrace. Many of us were here at a range of different rallies at the Parliament from time to time. Across the road is Solidarity Park, which is a permanent monument to that period. When we gather over there from time to time, people always remember the work that Tony did to establish that facility as a meeting point for the trade union movement, not only then but for all time, for workers in this state to gather for a range of activities.

Tony continued to work for those who were disadvantaged even after he left UnionsWA. He worked at Curtin University and he continued his ongoing passion for health and safety with his work through the Commission for Occupational Safety and Health. If it were not for his engagement in the early 1980s, we quite possibly would not have had the very significant legislation that was put in place in 1984. Tony needs to be commended for his significant work in that space. When I last met with him in a formal capacity, he was advocating on behalf of the Employment Law Centre and I was the shadow Minister for Industrial Relations. Even though he had only just had more surgery, he was still passionate enough to want to see that that organisation could survive, thrive and provide support to those people who may not have been in a union but needed assistance and legal advice when dealing with their employer. With his work with angelhands Inc, all the way up to the very end, he continued the good work that he has always done to make sure that there was a voice for those people who did not have one. We can remember him for the job he did exceptionally well in that space. From the range of speakers whom we heard at his funeral last week, we know that he extended that support and compassion to a range of people across the community.

Tony particularly needs to be remembered for his capacity to bring people together, not only within the community but also in the trade union movement, during that time in the 1990s. He broke down barriers between the individual trade unions and got them to work together and to acknowledge that there was a far greater evil out there than what was between themselves. The work he did and the seed he planted then have continued to be an advantage to those trade unions, which have continued to work together and to put aside some of their Cold War-type attitudes, we might say. They realised that there is a greater good. A significant legacy that Tony leaves behind is the change that occurred during that time when people from the left and the right of the trade union movement were able to come together and unite and work for a common purpose, and they continue to do so. All of his work and community commitments are significant, but for those of us who knew Tony as a friend, a neighbour and a colleague, for us, it is his girls who are significant.

When we moved into Victoria Park, I had the conversation with Tony that we were going to be his neighbours. Our girls are the same age and we have been very blessed to have had a very long and close relationship with Molly and Ella. We are very proud of his girls and I think that they will be Tony's greatest contribution to our state. They are eloquent and intelligent. They are amazing young women, and I think that was demonstrated last Thursday when they spoke for their dad. I know he is very proud of them.

I wanted to add a few words to acknowledge the significant contribution that Tony Cooke made to not only the trade union movement, but also our broader community. I acknowledge his ongoing work after he had left that

formal part of his work, when he tried to continue to make a difference to the lives of people who did not always have somebody who was prepared to speak up for them. I acknowledge his innovation in his work, how he did things differently and how he was prepared to shake up the way trade unions operated, how they communicated and how they worked with other people. I also acknowledge that as a family man he gave us two amazing young women. I am very proud that they have maintained a long and much loved relationship with my girls and my son. Tony is regarded as a good friend of my children. There were many occasions when they stayed with him. I can recall one incident when he took all the kids off in a houseboat in Maylands one day and put my second girl, Zoe, on the back of a tyre. Off trundled the houseboat, but somehow the tyre became disconnected. Tony was a couple of kays down the river and Zoe was back on the tyre. We had a discussion about needing to tie things a bit tighter! My children loved him and they will miss him. We miss his friendship and the fact that he was a good and very supportive friend and neighbour.

I pass on my condolences to his wife, Barbara. I note that Tony died far too young and probably would have had much more to do in his life. I acknowledge his mum, Sally, and his broader family, but I particularly want to note and pass on my condolences to Molly and Ella because he leaves a huge gap in their lives as well as in all our lives.

House adjourned at 10.18 pm
